



The Winking Owl: Visual Effect and Its Art Historical Thick Description

Eugene Y. Wang

Critical Inquiry, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Spring, 2000), 435-473.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200021%2926%3A3%3C435%3ATWOVEA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

Critical Inquiry is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Winking Owl: Visual Effect and Its Art Historical Thick Description

Eugene Y. Wang

—And yet this great wink of eternity,
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings.
—HART CRANE, “Voyages” (1926)

Can a painting such as the one shown here (fig. 1) *say* anything at all? In Western academic settings questions like this either appear to be worn-out commonplaces that induce yawns or are suspected to be quibbles, equivocation and play on the different senses of the word *say*. In a different institutional universe, however, these same questions may carry frightening implications. In March 1974 a group of painters in China, specializing mostly in traditional ink painting, were charged by the Ministry of Culture with blaspheming “the Socialist system”—meaning the state.¹ Their paintings were put on public display in China’s National Art Gallery in Beijing, as the so-called *Black Painting Exhibition*. The organizers’ captions constituted a de facto indictment of the artists’ subversive political intent. Among the paintings showcased, the centerpiece was Huang Yongyu’s *Owl* (fig. 1),² which shows a squat owl perched on a sparsely

I am deeply indebted to Joel Snyder whose insightful suggestions have benefited the revision of this essay. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

1. Fang Dan, “Pi heihua yuanshi cailiao” (The original document of the Castigation of the Black Paintings), *Nanbeiji* 105 (Feb. 1979): 27; hereafter abbreviated “PH.”

2. See Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian” (Shao Yu and the owl incident), *Jiushi niandai* 247 (Aug. 1990): 102.

Critical Inquiry 26 (Spring 2000)

© 2000 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/00/2603-0013\$02.00. All rights reserved.

budded tree branch, facing the viewer head on, with an enigmatic expression that can be seen either as a wink or as an one-eye-open stare. Its exhibition caption read: “Huang Yongyu produced this *Owl* in 1973. The owl, with its one eye open and the other closed, is a self-portrait of the likes of Huang. It reveals their attitude: an animosity toward the Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the Socialist system” (“PH,” p. 27). A grueling chastisement followed the Ministry of Culture’s categorical pronouncement. Reprimand sessions ran for months in the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, where Huang was a professor of woodblock printing, to coerce the painter into confessing his antisocialist stance.³ The controversy escalated to such a national proportion that it even came to the attention of Chairman Mao, who, irritated by the excesses of the factionalist cultural czars and their overzealous censorship serving their partisan interest, commented wryly: “An owl habitually keeps one eye open and other closed. The artist does possess the common knowledge, doesn’t he?”⁴ He dismissed the cynical use of art criticism as “metaphysics going berserk; a skewed view!”⁵ Mao’s pronouncement on the matter quieted the critics and put the controversy to rest, even though he had no intention of changing the overall political tenor of the time. After Mao’s death in 1976 the shrill ideological regimentation of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and its cultural policies were overhauled, and Huang and his peers were accordingly exonerated. The cultural inquisition by the bigots of the previous regime was dismissed by post-Mao revisionists as political

3. See Joan Lebold Cohen, “Art in China Today: A New Freedom—Within Limits,” *Artnews* 79 (Summer 1980): 67; Liang Tianwei, “Huang Yongyu de maotouying fengbo” (The controversy over Huang Yongyu’s *Owl*), in Huang Yongyu et al., *Wu Shimang luntan* (Mr. Much-Ado-About-Nothing’s Forum) (Hong Kong, 1989), p. 153; Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian,” p. 102; Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley, 1994), p. 373; and Shelley D. Hawks, “Painting by Candlelight during the Cultural Revolution: Assertions of Autonomy and Expertise in the Battle over Culture” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Seattle, Jan. 1998).

4. Liang, “Huang Yongyu de maotouying fengbo,” p. 153. A slightly different version of Mao’s quotation runs: “How can a painting in black [ink] avoid being black? . . . An owl by nature keeps its one eye open and the other closed” (Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian,” p. 102).

5. Critics Group of the Ministry of Culture, “Yige jingxin cehua de fandang yinmo” (An anti-Party scheme: the true story of the Gang of Four’s criticism of the Black Paintings), in *Jiefa pipan Sirenbang wenxuan* (Collected essays on denouncing the Gang of Four), 3 vols. (Hong Kong, 1977), 3:151.

Eugene Y. Wang is assistant professor of art history at Harvard University. He is the author of several articles on medieval Chinese art and modern Chinese visual culture and has translated Roland Barthes’s *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* into Chinese.



FIG. 1.—Huang Yongyu, *Owl*. Inscription in 1978. Ink and color on paper. 60 x 92 cm. After the 1973 version. From *Huang Yongyu and His Paintings*, trans. Yang Xianyi et al., ed. Zheng Xiaojuan and Xiao Shiling (Beijing, 1988), p. 12.

engineering spilling over into and running berserk in the art world. The once castigated artists of the Black Paintings became heroes, and their paintings received critical and popular acclaim. Out of a field of eight candidates Huang was awarded the commission to design the composition for the ninety-foot monumental tapestry of a mist-shrouded mountain panorama that was to be hung on the wall behind Mao's statue in the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall.⁶

It is easier to settle the political scores than the art historical accounts, and it is easier to exonerate the artist than the painting. There is a consensus now that the *painter* was a victim more sinned against than sinning, that he became an innocent pawn in a game of high-level power politics, and that the inquisition to which the painter and his painting were subjected made a travesty of art criticism. It is not clear, however, how innocent the *painting* was. Does the painting contain the message it was charged with?

The post-Mao interpretations of the painting invariably involve a re-assessment of the 1974 inquisition and remain polarized in their assertions: the painting suffered from either overreading or underreading. For the majority of the apologists, to vindicate the *Owl* is to stress its iconographic innocence and to insist that the painting contains none of the messages imputed to it. If anything, they claim, it is an expression of a loner or an antihero who nonchalantly eyes the frenzy and turmoil of the time with a half-resigned, half-sneering aloofness, "with one eye open and the other closed." The charge brought against it grossly overstated the case.⁷ An opposite opinion, held mostly by Western scholars, while acknowledging the pernicious bigotry of the inquisition, insists on the political-satirical thrust of the painting; in retrospect, these scholars claim, the cultural czars of the Maoist years did not overread the painting, as some argue, but actually underread its "implied political criticism."⁸ In

6. Joan Cohen points out that Huang "was chosen because of his artistic skill, but the unfairness and absurdity of the 'black paintings' persecution just a few years earlier must have had some weight in the choice" (Cohen, "Three Chinese Artists: Realism and Beyond," p. 69).

7. Fang Dan, "Qicai Huang Yongyu (III)" (Huang Yongyu, a rare genius), *Nanbeiji* 83 (Apr. 1977): 62–63. Fang Dan himself, however, sees the painting as a veiled criticism of Mao's wife. See Fang Dan, "Qicai Huang Yongyu (III)," p. 63.

8. Ellen Laing's interpretation of the painting runs:

Painted for a friend, Huang Yongyu's *Winking Owl* . . . , it was claimed by his detractors, scoffs at socialism. But the implied political criticism is more acute than this. Although it was not mentioned in the published materials on Huang, the owl in Chinese popular lore and tradition is an ominous bird: "The voice of the owl is universally heard with dread, being regarded as the harbinger of death." The owl was considered "a transformation of one of the servants of the ten kings of the infernal regions, i.e., is a devil in the guise of a bird." As a creature of darkness and ill omen, its power begins on the summer solstice, the day of the sun's greatest strength but also the day the sun begins to wane. The ominous connotations of the owl and the symbolic association that might be made between Mao's waning years and Jiang

spite of the polarity of the assertions, the majority of critics share the same conviction that the painting has an intrinsic cognitive content or a hidden message.

The nature of the case seems to make this assumption almost intractable. The interpretation of a painting here has acquired the character of a quasi-litigation that hinges on evidence, or the lack thereof, on the basis of which the painting is understood. Since the issue at stake is blasphemy, the charge and acquittal all hinge on verbal evidence; in the case of a painting, the verbal evidence is deduced or teased out of the pictorial matrix by reducing the latter to some set of discursive propositions.

The artist's own characteristically strong compulsion toward verbal witticism also makes him particularly susceptible to being perceived as voicing a view or a position through the visual medium. As prolific a writer as he is a woodblock designer and painter, Huang glides from one literary genre to another with perfect ease—moving with facility through poetry, plays, fables, aphorisms, and fiction.⁹ In fact, as he admits, his primary passion is writing novels, his second, writing fables, his third, woodblock printing, and his fourth, painting.¹⁰ A consummate artificer of both images and words, he is as eager to give shape to his thoughts through pictures and words as he is inclined to let the two forms of logic cross paths, if not stand in each other's way, which makes his painting all the more suspect of being a cleverly veiled polemic. It is no coincidence that the charge leveled against him by his persecutors follows a typical, albeit crude, iconographic procedure: first noting and singling out prominent visual features, and then matching them with the painter's writing as evidence of the subtext of the picture. To entertain the notion, therefore, that the *Owl* is unaffected by the artist's well-known loquacious disposition may seem like wishfully looking the other way. So, again, the question comes down to this: Did the painting itself say anything? Does it contain an encoded message?

The owl's wink itself seems to reinforce the impression that the bird's enigmatic expression indeed contains an encoded message. For "to wink," according to the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, "is to try to signal to someone in particular, without the cognisance of others, a definite message ac-

Qing's waxing political power surely figured in the castigation of this painting and its maker. Further, Huang Yongyu had earlier (1962) gotten into trouble for his "counterrevolutionary" "Animal Crackers" poems in which he used animals to lampoon political figures. [Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 86]

For Chinese critics' reservations about American scholars' insistence on the "political implications" of the painting, see, for instance, Wan Qingli, "Wo suo zhidao de Huang Yongyu" (Mr. Huang as I know him), in *Huang Yongyu*, ed. Huang Heiman (Hong Kong, 1993), p. iv.

9. See Fang Dan, "Qicai Huang Yongyu (I)," *Nanbeiji* 81 (Feb. 1977): 95.

10. See Sha Ming, "Huang Yongyu de manman changlu" (Huang Yongyu's long journey), *Jushi niandai* 323 (Dec. 1996): 6.

ording to an already understood code.”¹¹ The overwhelming central frontality of the owl, which claims the viewer’s attention, makes explicit the painting’s impulse to communicate with the viewer. Believing that the painting was wrongly charged with conveying a message it did not contain, one is likely to go about showing that it in fact means something, but not the kind of meaning that was unfairly imputed to it. This is an occasion for some radical alternative thinking. The enduring assumption that a painting is a deposit of meaning not only got this particular artist into trouble, it has also led art historians into a methodological morass. Wouldn’t it be better for us to drop altogether the notion that a painting as such has an *intrinsic* message or cognitive content?

This is no doubt an old question. The emergence of aesthetic consciousness and artistic autonomy had long ago denigrated the idea of truth in works of art to the extent that there is a “modern embarrassment in even speaking about truth in regard to works of art.”¹² In response to this “deep prejudice” (*B*, p. 118), philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer have argued that “the experience of art contain[s] a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science,” and that “artistic experience is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, . . . i.e. the transmission of truth.”¹³ While Gadamer emphasizes the *experience* of art, instead of locating the truth and knowledge exclusively in the works of art themselves, his dialectical nuance tends to be glossed over in the loud apology for the truth value of art.¹⁴ The popular assertion that art carries a special mode of cognitive truth has hardened into a critical commonplace and orthodoxy. Artistic style is considered by many a “means of communication, a *language* not only as a system of devices for conveying a *precise message* . . . but also as a qualitative whole which is capable of suggesting . . . diffuse *connotations* as well”; it may reveal “unsuspected *levels of meaning*” and contain “a *particular content*” or “an *inner content*.”¹⁵ To argue otherwise is to be suspected of resuscitating the antiquated notion of aesthetic autonomy and its art historical methodological correlative, that is, formalism. This is not my contention. I do not deny that art communi-

11. Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing?” in *Collected Papers*, 2 vols. (London, 1971), 2:480.

12. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 118; hereafter abbreviated *B*.

13. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), p. 87.

14. Gadamer proposes a model of “play” for describing the experience of art. Play, by virtue of absorbing the players into the rules of the game, erases the dichotomy between the subject and object to the extent that the play itself becomes the “subject.” Thus Gadamer is able to overcome Kant’s “radical subjectivisation,” which is the cornerstone of aesthetic autonomy (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 91, 93, 87; see also *B*, pp. 120–25).

15. The position is summarized in Meyer Schapiro, “Style,” in *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago, 1953), pp. 304, 306, 305, 306; italics mine.

cates with its viewer and that the experience of art can result in a cognitive insight. However, I do want to revisit the question of whether in certain types of paintings, that is, paintings devoid of textual or topical reference, such as Huang's *Owl*, the cognitive content resides *in* the artwork itself, and whether thinking in this way will do us any good in fully capturing the complex and dynamic communicative process that involves both the artwork and the active participation of the viewer.

This is a difficult negotiation. In making a case for one side, the pendulum may easily swing, out of control, to the other polarity. In recent years, a surging art historical interest taking cues from reception theory has installed the viewer on a pedestal.¹⁶ While this is a salutary move in general, it at times occurs at the expense of—or even to the exclusion of—artworks. Forsaking the old art historical responsibility of explaining why a picture looks the way it does, many of us flock to the side of the spectator and assiduously track down the contingencies and fluctuations of viewers' responses *irrespective of* the visual efficacy of the artwork itself, as if the latter were inconsequential and irrelevant. The situation runs parallel to the philosophical tension between essentialism and relativism, and the literary-historical dichotomy of textual authority and reader's assertion. The crux is always where and how to find a meeting point between the two. Is there a way we can walk the tightrope without privileging either side? In other words, can we conceive of the work/viewer relationship not as a binary opposition but as a coherent continuum?

While this in itself may not require persuasion, the challenge is always to locate and describe this continuum with some degree of precision. This is what I have in mind in the following inquiry into the *Owl* case. I want to register two points. First, we will do well to stop talking about the intrinsic meaning or cognitive content in paintings like Huang's *Owl*; instead, to anchor our interpretation we can substitute for it—and hence identify—the *visual effect*.¹⁷ This notion, which is methodologically more enabling, will allow us to negotiate more precisely between the artwork

16. To many art historians, reception theory is misconstrued to be a privileging of the reader (and by extension the viewer), while in fact its leading practitioners are always on guard against the "solipsism and anarchy" of the reader as much as against the "tyranny of the text" (Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* [Cambridge, Mass., 1980], p. 7). Its exemplary critical procedures engage the textual mechanism much more closely than is commonly understood.

17. Wolfgang Iser was among the first to propose the replacement of "meaning" with "effect" as the primary focus for the study of literary texts (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, trans. pub. [Baltimore, 1978], p. 54). Fish is another major proponent of this shift, activating likewise, in the vein of J. L. Austin, "the replacing of one question—what does this mean?—by another—what does this do?—with 'do' equivocating between a reference to the action of the text *on* a reader and the actions performed *by* a reader as he negotiates (and, in some sense, actualizes) the text" (Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* p. 3). Their proposal is now two decades old. Its enduring relevance to art historical inquiry remains to be fully mined.

and its viewer. Second, in characterizing the communicative process involving the painting and its viewer, instead of positing the painting as a source that beams out an encoded meaning to be picked up by a well-informed recipient, unerringly in an ideal situation, we might better conceive of this process as the painting working its visual effect *on* its contemporary spectators, whose viewing experiences can thus be turned into a cognitive or meaningful process; that is, the painting strikes them in such a way that they are galvanized into thinking their own private thoughts. In short, what resides in the artwork is the mechanism or device that produces visual effect, not meaning or cognitive content; it fulfills itself in the act of viewing that may generate meaning external to it. Our art historical responsibility is to correlate the formal elements in an artwork that produce the effect with the external meaning production that responds to the effect.

The Limits of Iconography, or Iconography of What?

The entrenched assumption that a painting has an “intrinsic meaning or content” and that “the ultimate goal” of interpretation is to “penetrate into” it finds its most compelling exposition in Erwin Panofsky’s introduction to iconography.¹⁸ Assessing Panofsky is beyond the purpose of the present endeavor, but suffice it to say that his iconographic method is context-bound in that it is a solution to problems arising from a limited phase of European art, in particular, that of the Renaissance, a figural art that thrives on the creative reintegration of classical themes and motifs across the intervening span of the Middle Ages. The binary opposition and interpenetration of classical pagan mythology and Christian theology, with their corresponding emblematic trappings, figural postures, and period costumes, allow the iconographer to decipher, for instance, a mythological figure in the guise of a Christian saint—that is to say, one system of concepts in the guise of a different period-specific representation, or vice versa, or a combination of two. The objects of Panofsky’s iconographic interpretation can therefore be conceived as partaking of a grand masquerade in which a figure or an idea is often poised or cloaked as what it is not. He is thus able to speak of investment of meaning as a matter of *in*-vestment. There is always an *inner* something to be unclothed and unpacked (see *SI*, pp. 3–31). His conception of Netherlandish painting as seemingly innocuous natural domestic scenes masking hidden symbolism further testifies to his notion of meaning as an interior deposit.

Panofsky’s iconography still remains a powerful tool with regard to

18. See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), p. 9; hereafter abbreviated *SI*.

the context from which it arose and for figural art in general.¹⁹ He does admit, though, its inadequacy to later artworks, such as “European landscape painting, still-life and genre”—in short, “the later, over-sophisticated phases” in which “content” is derived from the immediate visual efficacy of a straightforward image rather than referentially cloaked, that is, in the guise of a conventional allegory (*SI*, p. 8).²⁰ He does not specify whether such a “content” is still “intrinsic” or not—though this seems to be assumed—nor does he explain how to go about unpacking its iconographic meaning methodically. In any case, the assumption about “intrinsic meaning or content” dies hard; and because of it there is no lack of zealous efforts to “penetrate” or divulge the hidden meaning more or less in the vein of the iconographic scheme. It is this commonly shared assumption that gave the extremist zealots in 1974 the foothold to take the painter of *Owl* to task.

Let us see how visual effect would be a better guiding principle than “intrinsic meaning” by mapping the owl painting onto Panofsky’s well-known three-strata scheme. To recall, the first level is a preiconographic identification of the object being represented according to our practical knowledge and daily experience; the second level is identifying the concept or themes associated with an image by relying on the knowledge transmitted in textual sources; the third level is discerning, on the basis of “intuitive synthesis,” formal properties as cultural symptoms and extrapolating from them either the “inner meaning or content” or certain “tendencies of the personality, period, or country under investigation” (*SI*, p. 16).

The first level involves identifying “factual” and “expressional” matters (*SI*, p. 5). In the case of *Owl* we have no problem recognizing the figure as an owl. We do have a problem identifying and characterizing the emotional expression on its face, even though Panofsky thinks “the matter seems simple enough. . . . Everybody can tell an angry face from a jovial one” (*SI*, p. 9). To begin with, we are not even sure whether the painting purports to show an anthropomorphized owl *winking* at the viewer or depicts more faithfully the nocturnal bird’s natural disposition of *keeping its one eye open and the other closed*. The problem is analogous to the hypothetical situation Ryle once envisioned. Suppose, he says, two boys “swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes.” For the first boy, this is an involuntary twitch; for the second, a wink to an accomplice. Then a third boy, “to give malicious amusement to his cronies, parodies this clumsy wink.” To do this well, he needs to practice or rehearse this parodic facial mimicry in solitude. So the same eyelid contraction has four

19. For a more recent assessment of Panofsky’s iconographic method, see Brendan Cassidy, “Introduction: Iconography, Texts, and Audiences,” in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23–24 March 1990*, ed. Cassidy (Princeton, N.J., 1993), pp. 3–15.

20. Henri Zerner alerted me to this point.

different imports: twitch, wink, parody of a wink, and rehearsal of a parody of a wink. The differences among the four kinds of acts, as Ryle points out, are “unphotographable,” and by extension, with regard to our present case, unpaintable.²¹ There is no way we can tell whether the owl’s expression is a wink or a one-eye-open stare. The uncertainty naturally undermines any interpretation of the painting based on a single identification.

Panofsky does concede that “even in this sphere we encounter a peculiar problem. . . . Expressions depicted in a work of art may be unrecognizable owing to the incompetence or *malice aforethought* of the artist” (*SI*, p. 9; italics mine). For Huang incompetence is not a problem, whereas “malice aforethought” is often his stock-in-trade. In fact, as we shall see later, part of the rules of the game of the pictorial genre to which Huang’s painting belongs is precisely to allow and revel in impish “malice aforethought.” What we call visual effect often results from such contingencies.

The second level of iconographic analysis requires a knowledge of the conventional associations of the owl in Chinese tradition. We could indeed invoke a range of traditional texts to get a sense of the general Chinese perception of owls in which the owl is considered a harbinger of night, the inauspicious, the world of dreams and nightmares, and the numinous world of death.²² Even leaving aside the question of how closely ancient texts may bear on a twentieth-century painting and granting the artist’s erudite learning, we may bring to bear a more recent campaign to correct the old bias against owls.

Since the late 1950s, the owl’s moral character as an agent of dark unknown forces has been recast. In these years, as China experienced drought and famine, it was necessary to do whatever possible to stop voracious sparrows and mice from competing with the starving humans. Nationwide campaigns were launched to kill these destructive birds and rodents. Accordingly owls, the natural enemy of these malevolent creatures, were highly appreciated as “beneficial birds” diligently preying on mice and sparrows. With the ingrained Chinese cultural aversion toward the bird, however, the owl was a hard sell. Its apologists had a lot of explaining to do, and they did this in campaign style. Children’s books were

21. Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts,” 2:480, 482, 480.

22. In the Shang period, the owl was a cultic object, evidenced in the owl motif on Shang bronzes. In Han times, owls were regarded as either foreboding the inauspicious or as agents heralding the passage to the other world in tomb settings. See, for instance, Zhengzhou Municipal Museum, “Zhengzhou Xingtongqiao Handai huaxiang kongxin zhuanmu” (The tomb with brick-tile carvings at Xingtongqiao, Zhengzhou), *Wenwu* 14 (Oct. 1972): 47, fig. 14:11, 14:13, 14:21. For a discussion of the early Chinese perception of the owl as well as the owl images on the Mawangdui Name Banner, see Liu Dunyuan, “Mawangdui Xi Han bohua zhong de ruogan shenhua wenti” (Some mythological issues in the Western-Han silk painting from Mawangdui), in Hunan Provincial Museum, *Mawangdui Hanmo yanjiu* (Studies in the Han tomb at Mawangdui) (Changsha, 1979), pp. 281–91. See also Laing, *The Winking Owl*, p. 86.

written in which owls were described as lovable heroes dutifully guarding the crop fields against marauding medleys of rats and sparrows. The campaigners even made an educational film featuring owls as the protagonists. In this they accomplished the impossible, since shooting film requires glaring light, and owls, nocturnal by nature, were averse to even the dimmest of light. It took extraordinary skill and ingenuity to coax these reluctant, light-dodging birds into the studio and train them, much against their disposition, to swoop down on scurrying mice in the floodlights. The owl's public image was improved, at least among the generation that grew up with the picture books featuring owl heroes. Huang was an active illustrator of children's books, so it is likely that he would have known of these campaigns. Upon his post-Mao exoneration, Huang repainted a number of variations of the 1973 *Owl* with the inscription: "This is a benevolent bird."²³ So two conflicting associations—the sinister bird of traditional belief and the benevolent bird of the modern campaign—make equal potential claims on the owl image.

The problem is that matching textual sources with the image, as part of a conventional iconographical procedure, fails to take into account the workings of the visual effect of the painting. It represents not only an owl, but one whose look seems to oscillate between a wink and a one-eye-open stare; in fact, we cannot even be sure if the use of the owl is not simply a pretense to put up that enigmatic facial expression. If so, the owlness is only of secondary importance. In other words, we are not sure if it is the owl or the owlish wink—or whatever that is—that should concern us. In any event, each of these identifications would require us to come up with an iconographic match with textual traditions of a winking owl, or a one-eye-open owl, or winks or one-eye-open stares on human faces or other species. Even if we come up with matching texts and conventions, we are still short of accounting for an owl that is *none* of these, or *all of them* at once. This unschematic condition is what the visual effect of this painting is all about.

The third level as proposed by Panofsky, compared with the other two levels, is the least regimented in its requirement. It hinges on the "synthetic intuition" and "insight" of a "diagnostician" (*SI*, p. 15). Its only checks are parallel insights into documents in other spheres. The persecutors of Huang coincidentally followed precisely this procedure. They checked Huang's writings and brought the insight gained therein to bear on his owl painting and diagnosed in it the "tendencies of the personality" of the artist: a disgruntled person nursing a hatred of the socialist status quo ("PH," p. 27).²⁴ Hence the charge. No doubt, this is a travesty

23. See Huang Yongyu, *Huajia Huang Yongyu Xiangxi xiasheng* (Sketches of West Hunan by the painter Huang Yongyu) (Changsha, 1982), pl. 22.

24. The organizers' caption for the owl painting in the *Black Painting Exhibition* cites some aphorisms Huang had previously written and uses them as evidence for Huang's subversive intentions. See "PH," p. 27.

of iconography. But Panofsky's own formulation already betrays a tension between what he sees as the "intrinsic meaning or content" in an artwork and his implicit concession to the primacy of the diagnostician whose "insight" and "synthetic intuition" define a "cultural symptom." In other words, what Panofsky sees as the "intrinsic meaning or content" residing in an artwork is in fact shifted to the diagnostician's "synthetic intuition," which takes over as the locus of meaning production. Panofsky himself had a premonition of "how . . . dangerous [it would be] to trust our intuition pure and simple!" (*SI*, p. 15). Huang's misfortune shows it to be dangerous, indeed.

The Visual Model and the Contingency of Ascription

Any assertion that paintings such as *Owl* have an intrinsic meaning or cognitive content presupposes an investment of meaning by the painter. There is no denying that artists paint with a purpose and often want to make a point through their paintings. However, the relationship of the purpose and the point to the visual form is a matter of commensurability rather than causation. The artist tends to find a visual model, which he modifies to *fit* his purpose, and registers his point therewith, instead of having his purpose and point define and generate the visual form. This is to say that the artist's purpose and point, often private and circumstantial, have only a contingent and unfixed correlation with the visual form, which is often more public and stable. The purpose or point invested in a visual model is therefore contingent and, hence, external to it.

Huang invented neither the head-on owl image (fig. 2) nor the one-eye-open look. Both motifs have precedents in Chinese art.²⁵ He merely combined the two and adapted the motifs for his circumstantially rooted purposes. We can trace four different occasions on which Huang painted the one-eye-open owl. Huang first sketched a winking owl in 1963 for Ren Yu, a young female student of his in the graphics department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. It became one leaf in a set of unpublished sketched illustrations for his collection of fables, *Noah's Ark*.²⁶ The second and third occasions occurred a decade later. In 1973 Shao Yu, director of the People's Fine Arts Press, invited Huang and two other artists to his house for dinner. The host took advantage of the occasion to get the artists to paint on the spot. Huang painted "an owl with one eye open and the other closed." Some time later the same year Huang visited his

25. The source of inspiration for painting a one-eyed look may be traced to an iconographic trend in 1920s Paris that evidently had a palpable impact on young Chinese artists studying there at the time; see Chen Yanfeng, *San Yu* (Taipei, 1995), p. 51. They may have brought the motif back to Shanghai where Huang lived in the 1940s.

26. Conversation with Wu Hung, an old friend of Huang.

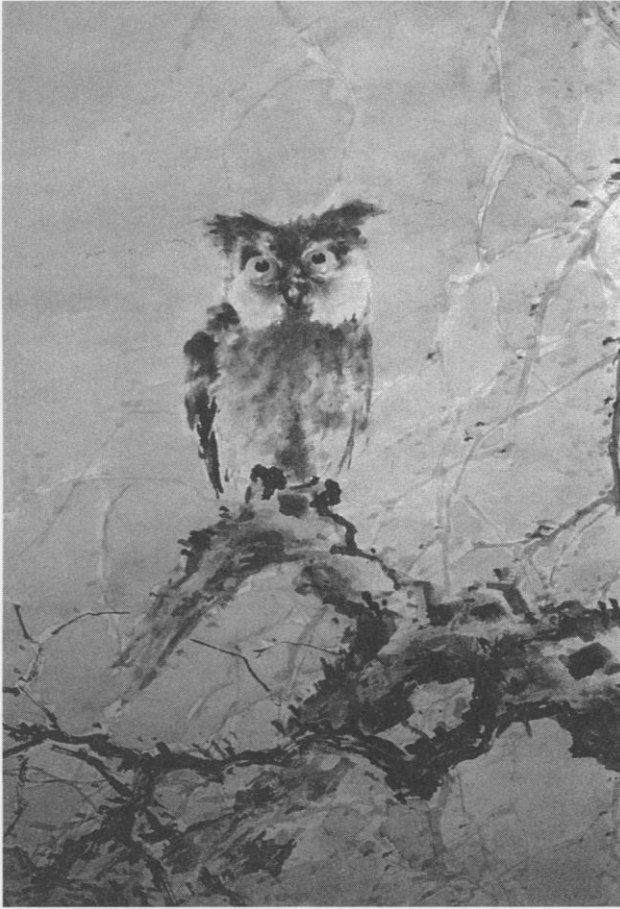


FIG. 2.—Gao Jianfu, *Owl* (detail). 1930s. Ink and color on paper. Shanghai Museum.

friend Xu Linlu who took out an album left by Song Wenzhi, a painter from Nanjing. Song had requested Xu to solicit his artist friends to paint on the album. Huang initially declined for the simple reason that he was not in the mood, having been distracted by preparations for a trip to the south. Xu suggested that Huang could just do a casual sketch of an owl, and Huang obliged. Finally, from 1980 on, after he was exonerated from the charge, Huang did a set of owl paintings on which he inscribed his poignant thoughts and hindsight on the composition that had got him into trouble.

It was the third occasion that was fatal to Huang. In 1972, with the initial frenzy of the Cultural Revolution subdued and diplomatic relationships with the outside world being gradually restored, China began to

reopen her door to foreigners. With the increased influx of international visitors, however, the old, austere, and ill-equipped hotels became a public-relations embarrassment. More hotels needed to be built, and some old ones had to be renovated, including the Beijing Hotel in Wangfujing. The commissioner Wan Li, entrusted by both Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai to head the project, took brave measures. To decorate the hotel interiors with artworks, he released artists from labor “reform” camps.²⁷ In the meantime, Premier Zhou gave the executive order that traditional Chinese paintings, particularly those with bird-and-flower and landscape subjects, could be used to grace the walls of the hotels for distinguished guests.²⁸ This was a bold reversal of the extremist policy implemented in 1966 by Madam Mao, Jiang Qing, and her extremist clique, who sought to remove all vestiges of so-called feudalism, bourgeoisism, and restorationism from China. Canonical traditional Chinese painting had been among the host of things to have been swept into the dustbin of history. Zhou’s reversal, with its beguiling pragmatic facade, had in fact the effect of softening the harsh contours of ideological regimentation, restoring the country to its normal cultural life, and giving back a certain degree of freedom to intellectuals and artists, many of them hitherto confined to reform camps. However bewildering the sudden change of fortune may have been for these erstwhile inmates, they unleashed, with gratitude and gusto, an outpouring of creative energy. Among the group was Huang, who was invited to paint for the Beijing Hotel. As a warm up, he was invited to travel to scenic mountains, such as Lushan and Huangshan, to do preparatory sketches.²⁹ This must have put him in a good, if not occasionally frivolous, mood.

Little did Huang and other artists know, however, that they were soon to become pawns in a new round of upper-level power struggles. Toward the end of 1973 Premier Zhou’s health was deteriorating. Seeking to topple Zhou, the extremist clique led by Jiang was searching for flash-points in the art world that would be most useful in arousing the public. They saw in Zhou’s authorization of restoring traditional Chinese paintings to the orthodox canon a good excuse for their orchestrated comeback. The so-called Hotel Paintings, presumably made with the catholic taste of foreigners in mind and relatively relaxed, if not unfettered, by the standard of the ideological strictures prevalent in China at the time, were an easy target for the cultural czars’ diatribes, which made a living out of straining logic. Landscape paintings, especially those by Li Kuchan and Li Keran, in which massive spreads of black ink were predominant,

27. See Fang Dan, “Qicai Huang Yongyu (III),” p. 62, and Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian,” p. 101.

28. See Wenhuaabu Pipanzhu, “Yige jingxin cehua de fandang yingmo” (A carefully planned plot against the Party), in *Jiefu pipan Sirenbang wenxuan* (Essays criticizing and condemning the Gang of Four) (Hong Kong, 1977), p. 146, and Laing, *The Winking Owl*, p. 85.

29. See Fang Dan, “Qicai Huang Yongyu (III),” p. 62.

could easily be characterized as exhibiting a sinister, brooding mood and animosity toward the political landscape of the Cultural Revolution. The extremists sent people to spy on the artists engaged in the hotel projects. Huang knew of none of these maneuvers. He did two owl paintings in friends' homes in a jovial mood. Little did he know that his occasional works would get him into deep trouble.

On the night of 23 November 1973, Jiang's partisans in art circles held a small meeting in the Friendship Hotel. Its participants included Shao, who thought of the owl that Huang had painted both for him—a fact he suppressed—and for Xu's friend, and presented it as a case of subversive art. Since Huang had been involved in the Beijing Hotel project backed by the premier, and since the ambiguous painting had a certain wayward overtone about it, *Owl* was immediately recognized as an easy target that could touch off a round of assaults on the premier.³⁰

In early 1974, 188 traditional Chinese paintings produced between 1972 and 1973 were rounded up and shown to the public in the *Black Painting Exhibition*. Characterized as “unruly, wayward, dark, and bizarre,” the works exhibited were all censured and castigated for their “serious distortion of the new landscape of the socialist country and tarnishing of the images of the workers and peasants.” They were, in short, deemed “poisonous weeds” (“PH,” p. 26). Foremost among the group was Huang's *Owl*, which bore the brunt of the castigation.

The absurdity of this willful ascription of subversive content to the painting is self-apparent, but we should not let our moral outrage cloud our art historical judgement. The truth of the matter is that the ascription of irrelevant meaning to the image is as external and accidental to it as Huang's own investment of meaning in it. The first three occasions in which Huang painted the one-eye-open owl have three different purposes and points. On the first occasion the painting displayed, presumably, a jovial, upbeat, perhaps a tad flirtatious, exhibitionist wink by a witty male teacher who was probably in a frivolous mood, untempered yet by the succession of torments he was to endure in the years to come. On the second occasion a decade later Huang painted the one-eye-open owl for Shao, head of a publishing house and a social superior. The overtone of the wink could have been anything from ingratiating to withdrawal, or from earnestness to perfunctoriness. On the third occasion Huang painted the image with a seasoned artist as the appreciative and judicious recipient in mind. A number of professional factors must have pressured and motivated him: the calculation of effects that could impress and surprise, a display of skills (use of ink and brush), a novel approach (the frontal pose, and so forth) in a familiar genre (bird-and-flower painting), and the crisp way of taming and reducing the rough-edged, fluffy image of an owl into a pristine, near-abstract configuration

30. See Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian,” pp. 98–102.

of three circles—or in the artist's own words, “a large circle of a body with two small circles of eyes.”³¹ The painting was therefore a wink to a fellow artist to alert him to Huang's repertoire of skillful tricks, a sort of technical wink that only a fellow artist could get. The same visual formula suffices for the artist to achieve different purposes.

Generic conventions also contribute to the contingency of meaning ascribed to paintings like Huang's *Owl*. The painting belongs to the traditional pictorial genre known as *xieyi*, meaning “conceptual writing” or “ideographic sketching.” The genre is characterized by a cursory and sparing use of brush outline and ink washes, resulting in an abbreviated composition that aspires toward the condition of minimalism. The underlying rationale is always to renounce the plenitude of physical appearance in search of the elusive conceptual overtones beyond representation. Driven by a desire to go beyond the limitation of physicality and to become what it is not, it is an art form in the vein of a self-denial, to the extent of erasing its own ontological status as painting—a deconstructive sort of painting.

As usually happens with a movement that aims at a more exalted goal, the *xieyi* mode often fell short of it and remained a utopian project. While the end is envisioned as a perpetual theoretical possibility, the means have hardened into a routine procedure, in the form of splashed ink and cursive sketches. By the twentieth century the genre had practically exhausted its energy. Its great practioners—Qi Baishi, Li Kuchan, and so forth—may still be household names in China, yet no one would seriously make too much of the generic promise of “conceptual writing” (*xieyi*) in the literal sense of the word. The conception or idea (*yi*) ends up becoming no more than a certain flavor, mood, and suggestiveness. It is customary for an artist to sketch a composition and then, on the spur of the moment, to endow it with some formulaic conception by inscribing a poem or some other discursive form on the painting. The identical composition could generate many inscriptions of varying content. Conversely, one inscription could be matched to different compositions, with minimal justification or cues from the pictorial images. The relationship between the visual design and the inscription that imputes discursive content to it is nearly always contingent upon the inscriber's improvisation.

Huang's own practice demonstrates the convenience of imputing discursive content to the owl painting and its resulting cognitive contingency and instability. In 1980 Huang wrote a lengthy two-part inscription on his newly finished owl painting (fig. 3).³² Part 1 is a quotation from the

31. Huang Yongyu, “Shao Yu he maotouying shijian,” p. 100.

32. It is not clear whether he added the inscription to the original 1973 painting or repainted one with an added inscription. The caption for the reproduction in *Huang Yongyu and His Paintings* does not give the date of the painting, but indicates “Inscription in 1978” (*Huang Yongyu and His Paintings*, trans. Yang Xiannyi et al., ed. Zheng Xiaojuan and Xiao Shiling [Beijing, 1988], p. 12).

ancient *Classics of Poetry*:

A wise man builds up the wall [of a city],
 But a wise woman overthrows it.
 Admirable may be the wise woman,
 But *she is* [no better than] *an owl*.
 A woman with a long tongue
 Is [like] a stepping-stone to disorder.
 [Disorder] does not come down from heaven;—
 It is produced by the woman.
 Those from whom come no lessons, no instruction,
 Are women and eunuchs.

They beat men down, hurtful, deceitful.
 Their slanders in the beginning may be falsified in the end,



FIG. 3.—Huang Yongyu, *Behold Me* (1980). Ink and color on paper. From *Shiyi* (Poetic resonances) (Hong Kong, 1986), p. 77.

But they do not say [that their words were] very wrong;—
 [They say], ‘What evil was there in them?’
 As if in the three times cent. per cent. of traffic,
 A superior man should have any knowledge of it;
 So a woman who has nothing with public affairs,
 Leaves her silk-worms and weaving.³³

Here Huang quotes two passages out of a seven-stanza poem titled “Beholding Me” (“Zhan ang”), which assumes the bitter and anguished voice of an individual in the reign of King You (781–71 B.C.). The speaker deplores the “calamities” and “distress” of his time, brought about largely as a consequence of the king’s indulgence in the caprice of his notorious consort, Bao Si (“BM,” p. 559).³⁴ The analogy Huang intends here between the ancient consort and her modern counterpart, Madam Mao, is self-apparent. The stanzas in the same poem that Huang omitted to quote and that are prompted as a muted subtext have an equally close bearing on the chaos and pathos in China during the Cultural Revolution:

Very long have we been disquieted,
 And these great calamities are sent down [upon us].
 There is nothing settled in the country;

 [Good] men are going away,
 And the country is sure to go to ruin.
 [“BM,” pp. 560–63]

Accompanying the lamentation of the country’s disasters is an anguished outcry over the speaker’s own lot:

Beholding me, Great Heaven,
 But you have never shown me your kindness!

 The sorrow of my heart,—
 Is it [only] of today?
 Why were these things not before me?
 Or why were they not after me?
 [“BM,” pp. 560–63; trans. mod.]³⁵

33. Anonymous, “Beholding Me,” in *The She King*, vol. 4 of *The Chinese Classics*, trans. James Legge (Hong Kong, 1960), pp. 561–62; hereafter abbreviated “BM”; trans. mod.

34. For various commentaries on the stanza, see *Shisanjing jingwen* (Text of the Thirteen Classics) (Shanghai, 1934), p. 77; *The She King*, p. 559; and *Shijing yuanshi* (The essential Classics of Poetry), ed. Fang Yurun, 2 vols. (Beijing, 1986), 2:568–70.

35. For the text of “Beholding Me,” with commentary, see *Shijing yuanshi*, p. 568. Recent scholars tend to interpret the phrase “zhan ang” as “beholding me” instead of Legge’s rendition, “looking up.” See, for instance, Fan Shuyun, *Shijing quanyizhu* (Classics of Poetry: a comprehensive modern translation and annotation) (Ha’erbin, 1986), pp. 540, 543.

Combining a diatribe against a queen with the pathos of self-pity, these lines work retrospectively as analogies to Huang's situation in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. Yet keep in mind that the inscription is dated 1980, already four years into the post-Mao period. The collective ethos of that moment was a critical revision of the Cultural Revolution, taking stock of the range of disasters brought about by extremist ideology. With his acute experience of suffering in the previous decade, Huang apparently partook of that general climate. If the inscription is not entirely an afterthought ascribed to the painting, it is at least a retrospective revision, a schematic articulation and reformulation of the riot of feelings and moods that may have attended the 1973 paintings.

Herein lie the perils of ascribing discursive propositions to potent visual images. While the owl/queen metaphor ("But she is [no better than] an owl. / A woman with a long tongue") in the *Classics of Poetry* works for Huang as a none-too-subtle political allegory, it undermines a more pressing strain Huang sees in the owl image, namely, the innocent bird unjustifiably maligned by humankind, with which the artist emotionally identifies. Since 1964 he had repeatedly been castigated for his freakish fables, which were taken as veiled antisocialist polemics. It is perhaps no coincidence that *Notes from the Jar Studio*, the collection of fables he wrote in 1964, contains a piece that portends Huang's future lot. Its speaker, an owl, sighs: "In daytime, humans curse me in venomous language; at night, I work for them."³⁶ Realizing the potential self-contradiction in his inscription on the 1980 *Owl*, that is, the simultaneous condemnation of the owl-as-queen and the emotional identification with the unjustifiably maligned bird, Huang adds following the quotation:

The *Classics of Poetry* has done gross injustice to both women and owls, for there is really nothing wrong with either of them. Philosophically speaking, it is like equating particular individuals with the species to which they belong. Owls are beneficial birds, yet they have been maligned for thousands of years.³⁷

Here Huang self-deconstructs. Quoting the classical ode to echo the prevailing revisionist sentiment of the post-Mao era, he finds that the political satire parasitic on the owl/queen metaphor actually demonizes the owl image, which is the last thing in the world he wants to do. His postscript following the inscribed classical allusion therefore seeks to redress the inadequacy, thereby in effect erasing the preceding inscribed text. This

36. Huang Yongyu, *Guanzhai zaji* (Notes from the Jar Studio) (Hong Kong, 1983), p. 23.

37. Huang Yongyu, *Shiyi* (Poetic resonances) (Hong Kong, 1986), p. 77. The inscription ends: "This is probably due to the Tyrannical Queen's exasperation upon her reading of the *Classics of Odes*." This closing line falters logically, though Huang's reference to Jiang makes sense.

shows how volatile it is even for the artist himself to retrospectively ascribe discursive content to his own painting. When the artist keeps changing his mind about what discursive proposition to impute to his own painting, can there be an intrinsic cognitive content lodged in it?

Winking and the Instability of Communicative Efficacy

There is no denying that *Owl* has a communicative efficacy that is derived, among other things, from the owl's enigmatic facial expression. There are two ways of characterizing it: one can see it either as a one-eye-open stare or as a wink. Either way is associated with a set of moods and entails one particular interpretation at odds with the other. The stare connotes distrust and hostility; the wink connotes trust and secret-sharing. Huang's persecutors held to the former interpretation, which chimes with a familiar Chinese phrase, "keeping one eye open and the other closed."³⁸ The saying describes a sneering aloofness or a resigned stance pretending not to see what is essentially an undesirable situation. Once the visual form is reduced to a discursive proposition, it is easy to attach an interpretation to it.

If one accepts the validity of this crude reductionism, then the zealots' accusation appears not too wide of the mark. But this reduction of the painting to one verbal equivalence does not do justice to the force of the image. Following Ellen Laing's characterization, one could perceive the image as representing a winking owl.³⁹ At the outset, the odds seem to be stacked against such a characterization. An owl does not wink; it just keeps one eye closed and the other open steadily for a sustained period of time, as Mao himself acknowledged. However, we are not talking about a real owl but about an anthropomorphized pictorial construct. The playful and droll overtone attending the cartoonish painting and the frontal engagement of the owl image with its viewer all combine to create the effect of a wink. At any rate, the visual ambiguity is such that the image seems to oscillate between a one-eye-open stare and a wink.

The artist himself has always been intrigued by the communicative efficacy of what he calls "meilai yanqu," literally, making eyes at each other, a concept that includes winking. In an essay titled "On Making Eyes at Each Other," Huang tells of his unusual experience with this mute communication through the exchange of facial expressions. Before he was set free to paint the 1973 *Owl* Huang and one of his longtime close friends were both confined to the same room in a reform camp together with a few other inmates. The general oppressive atmosphere at the time forced the two friends into a dead silence. Sitting at either end of the

38. For the caption of *Owl* at the *Black Painting Exhibition*, see "PH," p. 27.

39. See her excellent survey, *The Winking Owl*.

room, they stared at each other across the space. Soon they found themselves deploying their facial features—eyebrows, mouths, noses—to fashion a muted sign language “with rich and complex connotations” such as, “Something has happened in my home!” or, “Now the matter is getting serious!” or, “Watch out!” or, “The guy sitting next to you is a bastard.”⁴⁰ While the account generally confirms our impression that the painting registers the efficacy of pulling faces and making eyes, the end of Huang’s own rendition of the story strikes home the impossibility of encoding those cryptic messages with facial expressions. After he and his friend were set free, they tried to prove the effectiveness of their wordless facial communication to Huang’s incredulous wife, but they were unable to pull it off. His claimed success in getting across “rich and complex connotations” by pulling faces and making eyes may have been a shared illusion.

The effectiveness of making eyes in his paintings presupposes tacit knowledge on the part of the viewer. Take, for instance, Huang’s playful illustration of two of his own parables. One parable, “Quick Change of Faces,” describes a person metamorphosing, with lightning speed, from a villain to a paragon of virtue. The other, “Shame,” concerns someone who, having sold out a friend, causing his death, attends his victim’s memorial ceremony with a freshly composed elegiac couplet expressing profound grief.⁴¹ Both illustrations are variations on the same design idea: a one-eye-open, one-eye-closed look. If the first parable somewhat warrants this visual form, there is little in the second that calls for it. Without the prompt in its title, the visual design for “Quick Change of Faces” (fig. 4) could easily be taken to suggest a split personality. The design for “Shame” (fig. 5) could be taken as showing a frightened man. Both compositions visually refer to, or quote, Huang’s painting of the one-eye-open owl. Huang painted one composition of this for Shao only to have it used unflinchingly by him as a pawn in political intrigue, a liability to be held against Huang.⁴² Having debased himself in 1973 with the ignoble deed of selling out friends to the extremist cultural authorities, Shao assumed a penitent posture in the post-Mao era. Huang’s visual quotation of the owl design therefore underscores the memory of Shao’s hypocrisy, his quick change of face in the post-Mao period from foe to seeming friend. The pictures are winks of a sort: they assume the viewer’s knowledge of the owl painting, and even more, Shao’s role in getting the painter of *Owl* into trouble. Only Shao and a few in the know could understand this topically specific wink. For viewers beyond a small circle, none of these

40. Huang Yongyu, “Meilai yanqu lun” (On making eyes at each other), in *Wushimang luntan*, pp. 7–8.

41. See Huang Yongyu, *Liqiu yanshu renzhen sikao de zaji* (Notes that aspire toward the uttermost solemnity and seriousness) (Hong Kong, 1983), p. 1, fig. 1; p. 73, fig. 37.

42. Shao reported another owl, the one that Huang painted for Song, instead of the one Huang painted for him.

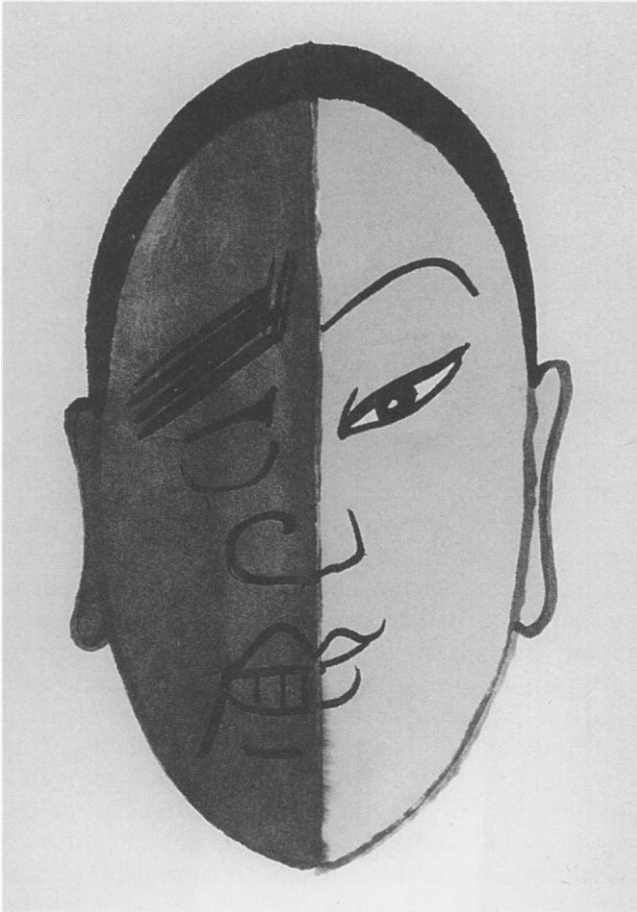


FIG. 4.—Huang Yongyu, *Quick Change of Faces*. From *Liqu yan-shu renzhen sikao de zaji* (Notes that aspire toward the uttermost solemnity and seriousness) (Hong Kong, 1983), p. 1, fig. 1.

cognitive contents can lodge in this visual device; nor is the image capable of *speaking* these messages.

In fact, in repeatedly using the motif Huang also deconstructs the success story of “On Making Eyes at Each Other.” He once wrote a fable about a courtier having an audience with the emperor. Vexed by a flea that has accidentally got inside his pants, the courtier is agitated and grimaces, which the emperor takes as a signal of something unusual afoot. This leads to the spotting of an assassin hidden on a ceiling beam. For this the courtier is amply rewarded.⁴³ Huang’s retrospective illus-

43. See Huang Yongyu, *Jiemoju zaji* (Notes from the Mustard Studio) (Hong Kong, 1983), p. 53, fig. 27.



FIG. 5.—Huang Yongyu, *Shame*. From *Liqiu yanshu renzhen sikao de zaji*, p. 74, fig. 37.

tration of the fable shows the courtier ogling with one eye open and the other closed (fig. 6). Its moral stands our common assumption of the communicative efficacy of winking on its head. To recall Ryle, “to wink is to try to signal to someone in particular, without the cognisance of others, a definite message according to an already understood code.” Huang in fact shows that none of this sharing can be taken for granted, and that winking, a signal of tacitly shared understanding, often leads to misunderstanding as well. The painting of the courtier’s wink is therefore a kind of metawink in that it recalls how Huang’s owlish wink, the meaning of which ought to have been confined to a shared understanding within a group of friends, should have been so grossly misunderstood.

Visual Effect as Interpretive Focus

To deny intrinsic meaning or cognitive content in paintings such as *Owl* is not to renounce our art historical commitment to meaning and its interpretation. The question is where to locate it. Predictably, the burden of meaning is shifted to the beholder. While this is inevitable, we ought to be aware of the hermeneutical consequences of asserting the commonplace that meaning is in the eye of the beholder. It could easily careen into unfettered relativism, an apotheosis of the beholder at the expense of the visual properties that make the act of beholding possible and meaningful in the first place and that constrain our interpretation. A more balanced view has been upheld calling for the "fusion of horizons" (B, p.



FIG. 6.—Huang Yongyu, *An Agitated Courtier Making Faces*. From *Jiemoju zaji* (Notes from the Mustard Studio) (Hong Kong, 1983), p. 54, fig. 27.

144). Yet such generalities, for all the correctness of their stance, have yet to crystallize at the level of practical criticism into concrete procedures. In dealing with paintings such as *Owl*, to renounce the notion of intrinsic meaning and cognitive content in the painting is not to give up looking for cues in the painting as a basis for interpretation. The question is what cues we should seize upon and what kind of interpretation may proceed from there. The shift of focus from intrinsic meaning or cognitive content to the notion of *effect*, as proposed by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and, in particular, Donald Davidson, points us in the right direction.

Davidson's theory of metaphor forms much of the conceptual scaffolding for the present study. He observes a tension in the conventional views of metaphor. On the one hand, metaphor is believed to do something no plain prose can do; on the other hand, interpreters want to "explain what a metaphor does by appealing to a cognitive content—just the sort of thing plain prose is designed to express." Various theorists of metaphor, according to Davidson, think they have a way of deciphering an encoded message in a metaphor. What they do in fact is talk about "the *effects* metaphors have on us" and "fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and . . . read these contents into the metaphor itself."⁴⁴ But the problem is that it is hard to decide exactly what the content is supposed to be:

The reason it is often so hard to decide is, I think, that we imagine there is a content to be captured when all the while we are in fact focusing on what the metaphor makes us notice. If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature, this would not in itself make trouble; we would simply project the content the metaphor brought to mind on to the metaphor. But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor 'means', we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention. ["WM," pp. 262–63]

W. J. T. Mitchell makes a similar observation with regard to our response to abstract paintings: "How can pure forms of paint on canvas say *anything*, much less articulate complex theoretical concepts? . . . The problem . . . is not that we have nothing to say about it, or that it says nothing to us, but rather that we feel overwhelmed and embarrassed by the number of things it can be made to say."⁴⁵ The convergence between Davidson's observation on metaphor and Mitchell's formulation of visual experience already makes it apparent that Davidson's description of the workings of

44. Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), p. 261; hereafter abbreviated "WM."

45. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994), p. 223.

metaphor and the challenge it poses for interpretation apply equally well to the experience of paintings. In fact, he explicitly extends his account of the effect of metaphor to include pictures.

If someone draws his finger along a coastline on a map, or mentions the beauty and deftness of a line in a Picasso etching, how many things are drawn to your attention? You might list a great many, but you could not finish since the idea of finishing would have no clear application. How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstated fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture. ["WM," p. 263]⁴⁶

To quote this is not to resurrect the specter of a purist argument, such as the one urged by Clement Greenberg, that seeks to purge the visual image of contamination by language.⁴⁷ Davidson acknowledges the abundance of verbal appendages that could be attached to a metaphor or a picture. He only wants to draw a distinction between the noncognitive nature of the metaphor or picture itself and the *effects* they produce. The question ultimately is "*how* metaphor [or picture] is supposed to produce them." His solution to this problem is tantalizingly evasive: "A metaphor does its work through other intermediaries" ("WM," p. 262). He does not specify exactly what these "other intermediaries" are, which are crucial to art historical interpretive procedures. This is the point at which we pick up where he leaves off.

It is, following Davidson, apparently pointless for us to fasten on the beholder's thoughts and read them back into the painting as its meaning or cognitive content. There is no end to the chain of thoughts a painting can touch off, and these are also often too free-floating and fleeting for the beholder to care to record them all, let alone for us to sort them out in any intelligible way. But, on the other hand, these thoughts are launched from certain elements in the painting. These elements are what Davidson would call "intermediaries," or, to borrow a phrase from Richard Wollheim, "projective properties," aspects in an artwork that enable or alert the beholder to see things in a new perspective and to arrive at new insights.⁴⁸ The challenge is to locate them and to relate the specta-

46. Richard Rorty makes a similar observation: "tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it" (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [New York, 1989], p. 18). It is interesting that Rorty equates the effect of making a face with displaying a picture. In this sense, the owl painting has a double effect.

47. See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1986), 1:23–38. For a compelling critique of the purity argument, see Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, pp. 95–97, 213–39.

48. Richard Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 144; see pp. 144–58.

tor's perceptual activities to them. Two interpretive schemes are in order here, proposed respectively by Roland Barthes and Michael Baxandall.

Barthes has a distinct way of formulating photography's effect—what he calls alternately its “affect”—on its spectators.⁴⁹ Acknowledging photography to be purely a “contingency” that resists any linguistic or schematic reductionism, he nevertheless feels compelled to devise a schema to account for its effects (*CL*, p. 20). To Barthes, a photograph communicates with its spectator in two ways: *studium* and *punctum*. The former is a photograph's cultural or moral charge, which it takes the spectator's cultural or empirical knowledge to appreciate. The latter is the accidental details that prick the spectator (*CL*, p. 26; see also pp. 16–60). The *studium* evokes the photographer's cultural universe; the *punctum* opens up the spectator's private horizon. The model proposed by Baxandall works in a somewhat different way. Baxandall alerts us to “the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder.”⁵⁰ Consequently, he asserts, we would do well to mesh the “cognitive style” of the beholder with the pictorial style of the painting.⁵¹

Somewhere between these two schemes lies the solution to our problem. Both schemes have the virtue of matching the beholder's perceptual apparatus with properties within an artwork. For Barthes, the otherwise inchoate riot of thoughts and feelings provoked by the artwork can be traced to recognizable local properties—the *punctum*—in the picture. For Baxandall, the assumed fit between a painting's embedded cues and a beholder's cognitive skills creates a heuristic device that facilitates a cogent interpretive move between the two. The problem with Barthes's model is that it presumes too much on the accidental details in the photograph to do us any good. Baxandall's scheme, on the other hand, premised on the “conformity” between cognitive and pictorial styles, if followed too closely may leave little room for us to accommodate the dy-

49. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), p. 21; hereafter abbreviated *CL*. Some art historians prefer the term *affect*, which Schapiro also used. See Schapiro, “Style,” p. 304, and Irene Winter, “The Affective Properties of Styles: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History,” in *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones and Peter Galison (New York, 1998), pp. 55–77. Winter's argument is also quite relevant to the present inquiry, namely, her claim that properties in artworks set up “emotional linkages of affective *experience*, via the culturally conditioned sensory motors of visual perception” and that “style both inheres in a work and lives in the eye of the beholder” (p. 72).

50. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1988), p. 34.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 38. There is a certain affinity between Baxandall and Wollheim, who also suggests the need to work out the relationship between the “visual stimuli” in an artwork and the perceiver's “cognitive stock” (Wollheim, *The Mind and Its Depths*, p. 134). While Wollheim's model posits the critic as the perceiver, Baxandall brings in the historical viewer's “cognitive style” as an object of inquiry, which is of more relevance for art historians.

dynamic fluidity characteristic of a spectator's perceptual activities, which are not his concern. This is where Barthes fills the gap. Conversely, Barthes's model is at once too precise in identifying the details—as if pictures work only iconographically—and too loose with their choice: he thinks they are only seized upon *accidentally*. A beholder often falls prey to the manipulation of a visual design. One painting may make him pensive, another may light him up. The way a painting works its effect is by no means accidental. This is where Baxandall's correspondence or fit between picture and beholder may help.

To match two things presupposes some shared features. Pictorial properties and perceptual responses, however, are, strictly speaking, un-homologous analytical constructs belonging to different categorical systems; their difference is that between physical objects and states of mind. To bring them in line with each other, we need first to fit them into homologous classes.⁵² The visual effect is what brings them on a par with each other. Pictorial properties are often characterized in terms of their effect, especially sensations: cold, horrifying; warm, intimate; and so on. The beholder's response is likewise articulated in similar terms, to the extent that an effect-oriented description pertains both to a painting out there and a beholder's perceptual response, or equivocates between the two. This is where the link between the pictorial property and the beholder's perceptual meaning production can be made. If a riotous pictorial configuration suggests to a beholder a tumultuous political climate, we cannot hold the painting solely responsible for that intimation by reading it into the agitated lines—though it is always tempting to take that rhetorical flight; nor do we assign that foreboding entirely to the beholder. Some identifiable effect—qualities and impressions of agitation, for instance—provides the common ground to encompass both an abstract form in the painting and worldly events (revolution or war) that preoccupy the viewer. For these two otherwise unrelated domains to be related, we need to reduce the viewer's concepts of revolution into percepts of agitation, on the one hand, and, on the other, to ascertain certain formal aspects in the painting that produce the disquieting effect or that can be characterized as such. Integrating into the equation the historical circumstances and moment in which the viewer is rooted, we can then map out possible routes and processes in which percepts of agitation turn into concepts of revolution and sensations become circumstantially referential intimations. In this way, some beholders' responses, however freewheeling, wayward, or fanciful, can often be brought in line with the picture that triggers these thoughts. What we obtain, then, is a process of mean-

52. This strategy is in part indebted to Baxandall's methodological reflection on the question of how to bring society on a par with art. He suggests that a modification of terms on both parts is needed in order to make a match. See Baxandall, "Art, Society, and the Bouguer Principle," *Representations*, no. 12 (Fall 1985): 32–43.

ing production involving both the painting and its contemporary beholder.

A close analysis of a viewer's account of the effects the owl painting produced on her in 1974 suffices to demonstrate this point. Dai Qing, a bewildered and ultimately disillusioned ex-Red Guard who had devoted herself "with fresh blood and life" to the revolutionary cause only to see her utopian dreams going down the drain, was among the viewers who stumbled into the *Black Painting Exhibition* in 1974. She considered herself a novice in the rarefied sphere of art, but each time there was an art exhibition, be it of Picasso, Fu Baoshi, or any other, she would go. She was not, she insists, predisposed to discriminate on the basis of the value judgements of others. Nor did she subscribe to the official or mainstream interpretation of the painting being exhibited: "All I hope is to catch a scene, a pose, a glance, even a patch of color, or a stretch of line that makes me sense or recall something. It may make me laugh, or make me sad, or itchy to say something but finally tongue-tied. The last thing I want is to walk out of the gallery bringing nothing with me."⁵³ At the sight of the "inexplicable owl" she was stunned and transfixed. She remained motionless on the spot for a long time. Then she suddenly raced to the zoo:

The bird in the iron cage really rose to the occasion. With its one big round eye, it stared at me without appearing to acknowledge my presence, exactly like its pictured counterpart in the exhibition. It made my hair stand on end [*lingren songran*]. Countless ideas flashed through my mind, such as taking a photograph and posting it below the exhibition caption or sending one to Wang Mantian,⁵⁴ and so on. Of course, I did none of these. *This* was good enough: for authors and readers, whether they write, paint, compose, . . . all that matters is that we all walk on the same land, breathe the same polluted air; we all huddle on the jammed buses; we all have been looked at superciliously by shop attendants. We have all loved, given away, dreamed, been bitten without provocation, been kicked, thrown down; we all picked ourselves up, licked our wounds and scars, and began another round of loving, giving, and dreaming. ["C," p. 17]

The chain of thoughts unleashed by her encounter with the owl, both painted and real, is riotously free-floating, tenuously associative, and

53. Dai Qing, "Cong xiaoshu dao dashu; cong dashu dao xiaoshu—Du *Yongyu sanji*" (From small books to larger ones, and the reverse—Reading the *Three Notes by Yongyu*), *Dushu* 71, no. 2 (1985): 17; hereafter abbreviated "C."

54. Wang Mantian, an official working in the Ministry of Culture during the Cultural Revolution, was a partisan of Jiang's extremist clique. She convened the meeting in the Friendship Hotel on 23 November 1973 at which Shao sold out Huang's owl painting and was the principal architect of the *Black Painting Exhibition*. See Huang Yongyu, "Shao Yu he maotouying shijian," p. 101, and Critics Group of the Ministry of Culture, "Yige jingxin cehua de fandang yinmo," pp. 147–48.

often surprisingly unpredictable. Who would have thought that the image would provoke in its viewer the association, however fleeting, with an arrogant shop attendant's supercilious look, among other things? These associations are undoubtedly tangential and external to the painting. Yet *something* in the painting galvanized this stream of thoughts. This something is not propositional in character, since one could reduce the painting into a discursive statement without actually coming into contact with it. This something is what mediates between the definite formal properties of a painting and the viewer's indefinite associations.

In spite of the woman's free-floating associations, we can more or less discern a pattern. The woman's response falls largely into two categories: on the one hand, chill, terror, alienation, and hostility; on the other hand, warmth, consolation, and sharing. These are the range of effects the painting produces. Effects are limited to these basic qualities and moods. Reducing these qualities further to the basic level of sensations, which characterize our response to a painting, we can ascertain that they come down to two primary moods: coldness and warmth. Identifying them allows us to relate the viewer's perceptual associations, which are external to the painting, to internal properties of the painting, to which we may ascribe the cause of some discernible effects.

There is, first of all, a configuration of elements that produced the cold and alienating effect. To understand the effect on the beholder here we must historicize it in relation to the cognitive and perceptual stock possessed by Dai in her time and circumstances. The range of factors that may have made claims on her perception include linguistic habit and her previous exposure and acclimation to iconographic generic conventions and expectations, and so forth. The association of the one-eye-open stare, in Chinese idiom, with a "cold-eyed" (*lengyan*) mood, must have made the owl appear to exude reticence and a remote and inscrutable aloofness.⁵⁵ Moreover, it is a stare that must have been disorienting to a perceptual habit conditioned by the generic conventions to which she had been exposed. Even though the traditional perception of the owl as a harbinger of dark night, death, and the inauspicious had been considerably softened in modern times, the choice of an owl as proper subject matter—not for a cartoon illustration but for a serious traditional Chinese ink painting—was still somewhat unsettling to a viewer such as Dai in the 1970s. Bird-and-flower painting is a distinct, time-honored pictorial genre in China. But owls had long been banished from it.⁵⁶ They are conspicuously absent even in the anguished compositions of Zhu Da (ca.

55. Fang Dan, for instance, sees the owl as "looking at the world with a cold eye" (Fang Dan, "Qicai Huang Yongyu (III)," p. 63).

56. Except in ancient times when people were more closely engaged with the numinous other, owls had been largely absent throughout the post-Han Chinese artistic canon in a culture hypersensitive to inauspicious matters.

1626–ca. 1705), arguably the consummate master of the bird-and-flower genre. Zhu was a disgruntled “leftover subject,” a Ming loyalist living under the foreign Manchu rule. His oeuvre is shot through with isolated and often lonely birds in various unpredictable bleak moods, poses, and bizarre compositions, and yet even for him, painting an owl seemed out of the question.⁵⁷ It is not until the twentieth century that we find some radical artists who *occasionally* admit owls into their pictorial universe, employing it in the representation of sinister matters.⁵⁸ Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), for instance, provides us with an early precedent of depicting an owl face-on in the mode of traditional Chinese painting (see fig. 2). But such paintings are still comparatively rare and hardly enough to acclimate viewers to the owl as a pictorial subject. Furthermore, for viewers in 1974, eight years into the Cultural Revolution, whose eyes had been persistently attuned to the heroic style of socialist realism, the freakish owl image inevitably intimated an alienating otherness. Compounding the effect of the shock Huang’s *Owl* had on its viewer was its unconventional rendition of the bird’s posture. Predators such as eagles or vultures in traditional Chinese bird-and-flower painting are typically shown in sideways or three-quarter views.⁵⁹ Experiments with head-on dispositions appeared in the early twentieth century. Not only are they rare instances, they seldom fill up the entire composition as Huang’s *Owl* does. There is also a discontinuity between the early twentieth-century style and that of the 1970s. Long predisposed to such representational conventions, a viewer in the 1970s must have found it disorienting to confront a staring predatory bird head-on. In any case, the owl painting must have caused the eerie anxiety that attends an encounter with the uncanny. Small wonder that Dai describes the sensation she felt as “songran,” a phrase meaning “making one’s hair stand on end,” “shuddering,” or “sending shivers down one’s spine.”

57. The inscription on an album piece by Zhu explicitly mentions “squatting owl,” an alias for taro, a starchy root. See Rao Zongyi [Jao Tsung-i], “Bada shanren shishuoshi jie jianji qi jiazi huaniaoce” (On Zhu Da’s “Shishuo Poems” and his bird-and-flower album dated 1684), *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong* 8 (Dec. 1976): 519–29, esp. pl. 3, leaf 2. Phrases like this must have prompted the artist to play with the idea of owl images as pictorial possibilities, especially since he was interested in portraying the brooding moods that the image would have served to project. Zhu nonetheless refrained from painting an owl.

58. A 1945 cartoon by Liao Bingxiong, titled “Owl’s Violence,” shows the owl as a treacherous predator bullying a rooster, thereby making a political satire of the tyranny of the time. See Bi Keguan and Huang Yuanlin, *Zhongguo manhua shi* (History of Chinese cartoons) (Beijing, 1986), pl. 245. Incidentally, Huang may have been aware of the picture, as evidenced in his own cartoon “Chick’s Questions.” See Huang Yongyu, *Jiemoju zaji*, pp. 33–34.

59. One notable example is *New Moon* (ca. 1914) by Chen Shuren, which depicts an eagle face-on. See Ralph C. Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906–1951* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 82, fig. 37.

The painting had such a chilling effect on Dai that she dashed to the zoo to verify whatever speculations she may have had on her mind, or simply to check if the painter had gone out of his way to fashion a wayward image. The eerie resemblance between the painted owl and the real owl in the iron cage deepened the sense of the uncanny. It was not so much that she marveled at the verisimilitude accomplished by the painter, which is not in any case what the genre of ink painting is generically about; rather, it was the coincidence, seeming to border on conspiracy, of the two mysterious stares simultaneously occurring in both the real and the pictorial worlds that made the woman shudder.

Then there is the effect of warmth. The distancing otherness of the staring owl is counterbalanced by its anthropomorphized character. The squat bird, with its hunched back and orderly curved contour, has a mischievous and cartoonish drollery about it. Its frontally exposed belly, made fluffy by an aggregate of lightly touched, diluted, ink-brushed grayish dots over a faintly pinkish hue, oozes a heartwarming tenderness. The bird's one-eye-open stare seems to dissolve readily into an all-too-human wink that promises a tacit understanding and sharing—though what precisely is being shared hinges on each viewer's private experiences. The head-on frontality further helps to co-opt the viewer into a secret-sharer. No wonder Dai was also moved; she took solace in the thought that “we have all” gone through this or that experience.

The painting is therefore at once chillingly alienating and intimately beckoning, which is a curious effect. It takes a horror film to produce the former feeling and a tearjerker to produce the latter. These different generic conventions put the viewer into different frames of mind, and it is not always easy to disorient his or her generic expectations. *Owl* did precisely this to Dai and other sensitive Chinese viewers in 1974.

This peculiar effect of conflicting moods provided a fitting formula for viewers like Dai to map out their complex feelings. The tumultuous Cultural Revolution had been a curious mixture of noise and silence. It was a vociferous era, with deafening slogans, shrill verbal assaults, and heated debates in public, on the one hand, and hushed thoughts, muted voices, and pregnant silence on the other. Being outspoken could have deadly consequences, and to remain silent was mostly often the only choice.⁶⁰ It was also a period of mob frenzy and private loneliness. Out of

60. For an expert portrayal of Chinese artists' predicaments during the Cultural Revolution, see Jerome Silbergeld and Gong Jisui, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State, and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle, 1993), pp. 55–84 and Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, pp. 314–76. For accounts of silence in contemporary China, see Vera Schwarcz, “A Brimming Darkness: The Voice of Memory/the Silence of Pain in China after the Cultural Revolution,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 30 (Jan.–Mar. 1998): 46–54. See also Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (exhibition catalog, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 18 Feb.–18 Apr. 1999), pp. 66–72.

these paradoxical conditions were born conflicting desires: yearning for intimacy and trust while being wary of closeness and betrayal, wanting to speak yet fearing giving anything away, living in fear while nursing hope. The forceful yoking together of two opposing moods in the owl painting—cold alienation and warm sharing—corresponded to this structure of desire for communication coupled with distrust of language.

For a more erudite Chinese viewer equipped with some classical learning, *Owl* would have produced a deeper effect, albeit of a similar kind, through the traditional association of the bird with the intimation of unknown numinous darkness, which signals a paradoxical promise of apocalyptic divination and deadening reticence. In classical literature, the owl's presence is itself an omen or an oracle to be deciphered and fathomed, whose answer is ultimately withheld. One of the earliest prophetic poems in ancient China is said to have been sealed in a "metal-bound coffer" to be opened only when the time was ripe. Even after it was opened, its content still remained a mystery to posterity; all that is known is a synecdochic image *cum* title: "The Owl."⁶¹ The bird is an endlessly regressed deferral of final revelation, a false promise of a message that it cannot deliver. In Jia Yi's "The Poetic Exposition on the Owl," the *locus classicus* of the subject, the speaker anxiously questions the ominous owl that unexpectedly descends on him:

Of this owl I would ask,
 "On leaving, where will I go?
 Do you tell me words of luck,
 or ill words of my doom?
 Will my span end soon or late?—
 speak to me the time."
 A breath then passed the owl's beak,
 it raised its head, spread its wings.
 Its mouth incapable of words.⁶²

The tension between the owl's role as a revelatory augur and its mystifying reticence heightens the apprehension about the unknown. A less bookish and more intuitive viewer like Dai may not have had the classical allusion at her fingertips. The owl painting nevertheless produced the same effect of apprehension in her. In 1974 the sense of the unknown and uncanny had a special contextual bearing. The collective angst in China at the time was an apprehension about what was to come as the Cultural Revolution drew to its bizarre closing years. The vaguely ominous and apocalyptic overtone of the owl image called to Dai's mind an

61. Anonymous, "The Metal-Bound Coffin," in *The Shoo King*, vol. 3 of *The Chinese Classics*, pp. 356–59.

62. Jia Yi, "The Poetic Exposition on the Owl," in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*, trans. and ed. Stephen Owen (New York, 1996), p. 110.

enigmatic couplet from Baoguangsi, a Buddhist temple, that was in wide circulation at the time and that captured the contemporary anxiety:

For the other-worldlings, the Dharma-law has no law,
 thereby one knows that the lawlessness is the law;
 For the worldly events, they end while appearing not to end,
 so why not end up without ending them?

["C," p. 17]

The couplet, at once revelatory and mystifying, captures the paradoxical attitude of the time: the desire for, and despair over, revelation. It is a fitting formulation for Dai to bring to bear upon the owl painting.

The artist who painted *Owl* for a fellow artist on a social occasion was unlikely to have encrypted these thoughts in his painting. The visual model inadvertently lent itself to being seen as suggestive, as in Dai's view. It lent itself to an expressive use by Huang and his friends as well. During the inquisition period when strained charges were pressed against the painting, when Huang's friends saw him on the street they dared not openly speak to him; instead they would, across a distance, beckon him with one eye open, the other closed. Huang would look back with the same facial expression.⁶³ When Huang's friends tried to talk him into writing memoirs or publishing his diaries following his exoneration, Huang exploded in the exasperated voice of his owl, "Forget it. Without producing a noise, I have already been cursed for thousands of years; for me to write in black and white, can you imagine what would have happened to me?"⁶⁴

While he may be wary of saying too much, retreating behind reticent visual images such as the owl painting, Huang cannot avoid being *taken as saying* much through them. Since the dark cloud was lifted from the painting in the post-Mao years, the winking owl, having generated so much discursive heat, can no longer unload the freight of language it has taken on. Huang himself busily inscribed words onto his reworked owl paintings to make the owl freely loquacious (see figs. 1, 3). The layered contexts and subtexts—the shrill charges, the subsequent vindication, and so forth—weighing on the painting made it an anchor point for dizzying dialectics oscillating between rhetorical plenitude and its absence, referential topicality and its denial, semantic richness and its depletion, a dialectics exacerbated by the long-lasting debates concerning its deposited cryptic meaning or its oblivious state of innocent nonmeaning.

The oscillation between these two poles makes the one-eye-open owl image a potent visual formula in post-Mao China. References to the wink-

63. Fang Dan, "Qicai Huang Yongyu (III)," p. 63.

64. Huang Yongyu, *Jiemoju zaji*, p. 209.

ing owl thrive on the memory of its coy poise between imagined eloquence and brooding silence. With the end of the Cultural Revolution the long-held silence was finally broken. Critical reflection on silence became a cathartic topos that released the pent-up desire for speaking out. A play titled *Amidst Silence*, by Zong Fuxian, staged at the Shanghai People's Theater in the immediate wake of the Cultural Revolution, became the monumental mouthpiece for the collective sentiment of the time. The title alludes to a classical poetic line by Lu Xun, the foremost man of letters of twentieth-century China: "Amidst the brooding silence, one hears a sudden clap of thunder."⁶⁵ Not coincidentally, Wang Keping, a Beijing-based artist, made a group of wooden sculptures that includes two quite suggestive pieces. One, titled *Silence* (1978), shows a human head with one eye mutilated and other widely open (fig. 7). The other is a sculpted face of Mao, initially titled *Idol* (1979), and retitled *Buddha* in 1980, with one eyeball protruding, and the other eye half-closed (fig. 8).⁶⁶ The two pieces by the same artist are mutually illuminating. It is impossible not to think of them as making visual reference to Huang's well-known one-eye-open owl. If so, it makes sense that one points us to the Maoist years and that the other should be titled *Silence*. The wink, in its extended sense, is premised on a tacitly shared knowledge of what it was like to have gone through the Maoist years and what it takes to be able to wink, with the memory of the winking owl as its shadowy referent. As with *Owl*, the force of the image is an ineffable signal of the conviction that the unspoken message is getting across to its viewer—whatever that message is. That Wang should match the issue of silence with the visual form of the one-eye-open face validates our interpretive reconstruction of an unarticulated sensibility, the anxiety of the waning years of the Cultural Revolution, and the paradoxical conflation of the yearning for communication and the retreat behind silence. Huang's painting of the one-eye-open owl *inadvertently* became the pictorial articulation of all these.

Like a fresh trope that can ossify into a dead metaphor, Huang's visual device is in danger of losing its original communicative efficacy as

65. Lu Xun, "Wuti" (Untitled; 1934), in *Lu Xun quanji* (Complete works of Lu Xun), 16 vols. (Beijing, 1981), 7:448.

66. Wang Keping belonged to the Star Group, the first avant-garde artists to emerge in the post-Mao era. The two sculptures discussed here were first exhibited in the National Art Gallery, Beijing, in August 1980, with official approval, since their critical edge was directed at the oppression of the Cultural Revolution and the focus was mostly on the Gang of Four rather than Mao himself, putting them therefore more or less in line with the post-Mao revisionist ethos. They were nevertheless controversial. Wang changed the title to *Buddha* because he found *Idol* too limiting. For the Star Group and their exhibitions, see Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, pp. 396–400; *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 150, 197; and Wu, *Transience*, p. 17.



FIG. 7.—Wang Keping, *Silence* (1978). Wood. Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

well. The winking owl has been appropriated as a popular design pattern (fig. 9), inspired by—if not parasitic on—Huang’s painting. By the time Zhang Jiemin created *Lass in Yellow Ski Wear* (1985), which depicts, in a cubist style, a young woman with one eye open and the other closed (fig. 10), the winking icon had become a hot commodity in the cultural fashion industry. Its increased currency goes hand in hand with its decreased efficacy, a sad fact that bothered Huang so much that he vowed to quit winking by lining up five owls horizontally on a branch with the penultimate one turning its rear to the viewer and the last one falling off (fig. 11).

The situation materializes the hypothetical scenario dreamed up by Ryle and made memorable by Clifford Geertz, namely, we have “winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, [and] rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking” all stacked upon one another.⁶⁷ Geertz sees in situations like this the occasion for an anthropologist to engage in “thick description” in order to get into, or out of, the thicket of phenomenological charades posed by the cultural other.⁶⁸ While its methodological appeal for art his-

67. See Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts,” 2:480–96, and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 7.

68. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 10.



FIG. 8.—Wang Keping, *Idol or Buddha* (1979). Wood. Courtesy of Gao Minglu.

torians is equally irresistible, the pictorial indistinction between a wink and whatever it is that masquerades as the semblance of a wink calls for a thick description of a different sort. While we cannot do too well in distinguishing between a wink and a twitch in a painting, we can shift the focus and give equal attention to the accomplice of the winker and determine the kind of communicative game taking place between the two.

The paradoxical attitude—the simultaneous yearning for communication and retreat into silence—we have extrapolated from the viewer’s response to the winking owl would, in the old art historical vocabulary, have been characterized as a cultural symptom that *Owl* manifests. Now by shifting interpretive focus from the imagined latent cognitive content of a painting to its visual effect, we locate the cultural aspirations and anxieties logically in the viewer’s perception *without divorcing* them from the properties of the painting, such as iconographic cues, generic traits, stylistic dispositions, and so forth. The owl winks only because its accomplice, the beholder, winks at it. The real winker is the viewer; the owl that appears to be winking in the painting is in fact made an imagined accomplice and an unwitting, co-opted secret-sharer. It may thus get implicated in a fictive conspiracy that is not its design and for which it should not be held liable. It is an inadvertent partner in a charged or

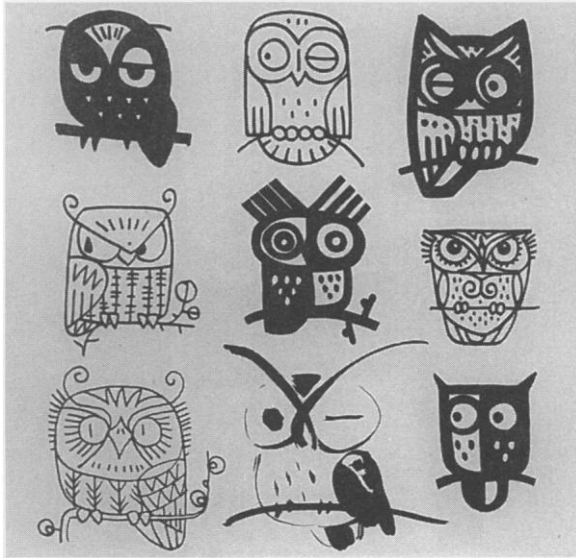


FIG. 9.—Han Meilin, variations of the owl motif as a design pattern. From Han Meilin, *Shangzai renjian* (Still in the human world) (Jinan, 1980), p. 149.



FIG. 10.—Zhang Jiemin, *Lass in Yellow Ski Wear* (1985). Oil on board. 18 5/8 x 24 in. From Richard E. Strassberg and Waldemar A. Nielsen, *Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People's Republic of China* (Pasadena, Calif., 1987), p. 42, pl. 16.

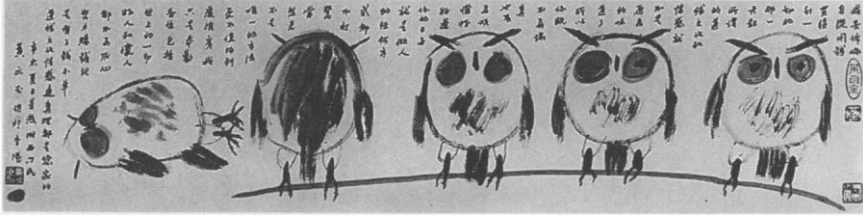


FIG. 11.—Huang Yongyu, *Five Owls* (1991). Ink and color on paper. 33.5 x 136 cm. From *Huang Yongyu*, ed. Huang Heiman (Hong Kong, 1993), p. 57, pl. 21.

secretive exchange of fleeting glances and darting winks. As ephemeral perceptual acts, the glances and winks have all faded into thin air with the disappearance of the real winker, leaving the painted owl as the only physical trace—hard evidence, witness, and unwitting accomplice all in one—to testify to the visual drama and conspiracy that has taken place. No wonder it attracts both persecutors and art historians for whom the taste for visual evidence is their only shared passion.